Provide adequate time for data system development and testing

Many Better Buildings Neighborhood Program partners found that setting up their information technology (IT) systems early in the program design stage ensured that data terms and data entry procedures were consistently applied by all system users. Reaching agreement with stakeholders (e.g., contractors, lenders, marketing partners, evaluators, program staff) on what data the data system would collect, known as system requirements, and how the collected data would be used to evaluate the program helped programs ensure that the data collected was complete. Programs have also found that they receive data of the quality needed for graphs and cost-effectiveness calculations when stakeholders agree up front that the data will be used for these purposes and not just to track energy savings and expenditures.

- **Be SMART Maryland** [1] found that transitioning from spreadsheet-based data collection system to a customized energy IT system was crucial to administering a multifaceted energy efficiency program with rigorous data collection requirements. Investing in their system while they were still designing their program allowed Be SMART to smoothly integrate the system into the program's operations and to ensure quality data collection and integrity over time. Be SMART also found that while spreadsheets were useful tools in collecting data, their use in analyzing data and generating reports was limited, since the program had to go through a time-consuming consolidation process to combine data from different sources and spreadsheets.

- In Boulder County, Colorado, **EnergySmart** [2] found that it took between four to six months for a database developer and coding consultant to fully develop and test the data system because of its high level of complexity and the customization required. The program also found that having actual users test the system with real inputs and real reporting requirements helped ensure better data quality and user-friendliness. In addition, EnergySmart found that before beginning database development, it was important to reach agreement among stakeholders on what reporting will be expected, and design the database to facilitate building and exporting the reports. For EnergySmart, it was important to set expectations with report recipients about the IT system's reporting capabilities early on in the process, so recipients did not expect reports that the system was unable to produce.

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Links

[1] http://www.mdhousing.org/Website/Programs/BeSmart/

[2] http://www.energysmartyes.com